Rosa Lia and the Secret of the Trees

by

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Rosa Lia sat on her towel, making an effort to pretend she was alone on the beach, even though she was surrounded on all sides by the screams of the other kids. Her mother had enrolled her in the day camp against her will.

"You cannot spend the whole summer at home," she had said. "Grandma is gone and your dad and I feel more comfortable knowing that, while we're working, you're having fun with other girls your age and that there's someone looking after you during the day…"

Afraid: her mother was afraid. Actually, if it had only been her father, Rosa Lia could have done whatever she wanted. He trusted her and, even though he couldn't really keep tabs on her during the summertime with all his work at the restaurant, he knew she would get by somehow. From the moment she had come into the world backwards, feet first, her mother had told her "You're careless" so often that even Rosa Lia ended up believing it. However, that summer she had entrusted her anxious need for control to the wrong people. The older kids hired to entertain the younger ones at Punta Spina were too busy joking, flirting and showing off, so most of the time, anybody could go in and out of the water undisturbed with total freedom. What is more, that year there were only two other eleven-year-old girls. Rosa Lia would watch them joking on the shore, having cartwheel contests. She could have just stood up and asked them if she could play too. But the girls already knew each other from before and didn't seem to have any intention of making new friends.

She stared back at the sea again. It was choppy with waves that morning and the beach seemed to have a hard time containing them. An ash gray sky hung overhead from the last fire. Ever since her grandma had died, it seemed to Rosa Lia as if the fires had multiplied, as if even the forests surrounding the city had decided to wear black or disappear.

To one side of the small gulf, by some incredible miracle, the cliffs were topped by evergreen trees bending toward the water. Rosa Lia could just manage to glimpse their roots. She would have

liked to swim to them and climb up the rocks to touch them. As a little girl, she had often dreamed of scrambling up to a crooked, old carob tree, the furthest one, and carving her initials “R” and “L” into the gray bark of its trunk. It was just a dream, though. Back then she didn’t know how to swim well enough, and even now that she was grown, her parents would never allow her to venture off in that direction. For years people had been saying that some local businessman was planning to burn down all the surviving trees to build a hotel. And it was just a matter of time before the fire broke out.

That morning, however, she suddenly got the idea to really try and do it. Why not? Nobody would notice. Besides, her mother wasn’t there to tell her she couldn’t. So she walked slowly over to the shore, so as not to arouse suspicion. She looked around, pretending to play in the undertow. Then she put her hands on her hips and started getting her feet wet. The water inched up her body until she was in waist-high. Two boys passed her playing with water guns, splashing her. But it was as if Rosa Lia were invisible to them. And right then, for her, that was just fine.

She continued without looking back until she got to a point where she could barely touch the sandy bottom with her tippy toes. From there she started to swim. She hid among the waves. From the beach they would hardly be able to see her. She was going further and further out and the current seemed to be carrying her right where she wanted to go. She had never swum out that far, but she wasn’t afraid, she knew where she was going. She switched swimming style, trying a few strokes of the backstroke. Then, to rest her arms a bit, she did a dead man’s float and let the water rock her a little further on. Yet each time she closed her eyes, she found herself at the funeral, where two weeks before she had bid her grandmother farewell for the last time. Her grief was deep, dark and indefinable, like the seabed she was floating over.

When she caught her breath and felt a bit bolder, she turned onto her belly and started swimming again doing the breaststroke. But as soon as she looked up, she knew she had gone further than she had expected. Only a few strokes more and she would reach the far edge of the gulf, beyond which was the open sea. Right in that spot, there was a natural platform which would allow her to easily stand on a carpet of algae and start to climb up to the trees.

Her eyes began searching for the beach again. The umbrellas, the people, the beach huts… it had all gotten so small. By now no one would be able to see her from so far away. But who would even notice she was gone anyway?

As she was distracted by these thoughts, a wave rose up that was more powerful than the others and caught her off guard, sending her underwater. She struggled to return to the surface, just in time to gasp for air, when another wave even bigger than the last pushed her down again. Her mouth filled with salt water. Rosa Lia could no longer breathe and the tide was relentless. She had even lost all sense of direction and didn’t know which way she should try and swim. Before her, the sea had become one single, blue, bullying mass.

She tried to turn around again to see how far she was from the coast. But when she finally managed to do so, struggling against the current with all her strength, she was shocked. She was so close to the rock wall that the next waves would surely slam her right into it. There was no way out. The nature of the sea was way more powerful than she was. She stretched out her arms and let her body float on the surface of the water.

One,

two,

three waves.

They grew stronger, quickly pushing her toward the rock wall.

Rosa Lia thought again about her grandmother: maybe the current was dragging her to a place where she would be able to see her again. A place where, surely, her grandmother was already waiting for her. And then the mass of waves pushed her down and hurled her with all their terrible might toward the crag.

Rosa Lia closed her eyes and held her breath.

But she never hit it. Something rough positioned itself between her and the sharp rocks and grabbed her, lifting her up. It wasn't until she parted her eyelids again that she saw that it was a branch of the carob tree. How had she not noticed it before? For a second, she imagined that the tree had come to her aid, reaching down with its leafy branches.

Without much difficulty, though still shaken by the danger she had been in, she climbed up the tree to the top of the cliff where it was safe. She hopped down. It felt wonderful to be back on dry land.

She took a breath and looked up toward her savior, its dark green foliage set off by the wind, its curved trunk… but then had to grab one of its branches to keep from falling down in shock. Etched into the bark of the wood, she could barely make out her initials.

"R" and "L."

Just like in her dream.

Chapter One
Piazza Magnolia

School had just let out and Rosa Lia woke up on the first Monday of summer vacation without any big plans. It must have been very early, yet the air was already hot, and even that year there was a burning smell. The light filtering through the red and white striped sunshade over the balcony off the living room reached all the way into her room, where the closed Persian blinds allowed very thin, golden strips of light though. She had not heard her parents leave, but from the silence floating in the hallway, she knew they were gone.

She got up, took a bite of the brioche her mom had left her on the kitchen table, went to the bathroom, rinsed her face and, without even looking in the mirror, ran to feed the stray cats roaming the narrow street. She was twelve years old with long, brown hair that she wore frizzy and messy and fair skin. Ever since she was little, the sun had given her freckles, so she never went out without a hat. Her favorite was a straw hat with red around the edges.

Her parents had given her a phone a few days ago, more so they could check up on her than because she wanted one. The previous summer, some firemen had had to rescue her from up on top of a cliff, but Rosa Lia had threatened her mother that she would do something even worse if she tried to enroll her in another day camp. So that year she got to stay at home alone, promising that they would always be able to get a hold of her and that she wouldn't get into any trouble. That Monday she was trying to figure out how to change the wallpaper on her phone and would have continued like that for hours if the cats from Kubla, the city's oldest neighborhood, had not come meowing beneath her window for her to come out and play with them.

Kubla was the name the neighborhood where she lived. For her, it was also another name for the summer, because from the day she was born, she had never spent a summer vacation anywhere else. First, it was her grandmother who had kept her company during these hot months. She lived in the apartment above theirs and every morning Rosa Lia could hardly wait to go up and ring her doorbell. Her name was Rosalia too, and as far as she knew, even her grandmother's grandmother had had that name. Every other generation, that name was passed down to the first-born daughter in the family. When it came to her turn, her mother thought the name needed some updating, so she split it in two.

Rosa Lia didn't mind having a kind of old-fashioned name. She adored her grandmother and was happy to be named after her. Her grandmother knew the city so well it was as if she had lived

there since its founding. She could wander its narrow streets for hours without ever needing to look at a map. She never tired of it. In the evenings, she still had enough energy to tell her new stories about the adventures of knights and witches. About how Orlando had split a stone with his sword in a town square or how Angelica had been forced to flee her suitors, about Bradamante's magic ring or even of the many rooms with no way out in the enchanted castle of Atlante. Her voice was so convincing that, for Rosa Lia, it was as if they were stories that had actually happened. When the stifling heat became too much, she would take her to churches and crypts where it was cool, or they would hole up together in the Marionette Museum or in the rooms of Brigliadoro Palace. Yet they would always end up sitting on a bench under the largest banyan tree in Piazza Magnolia of Villa Margherita park. That was their favorite spot. Rosa Lia would lay her head on her legs while her grandmother would caress her hair.

"All the magic of our island is locked inside the trees," she would always tell her. Every time she went back, it was as if she could still hear her voice. Rosa Lia never did understand what she meant by that, but she had learned to believe her. If there was something magic in the world, it had to be inside those giant trees.

Rosa Lia's parents worked every day of the week at Piscispada, a popular restaurant in the center of town. For them, summer was when they worked the most. Vincenzo was the sous chef and Marì was the head of the wait staff. From lunchtime until late at night, throngs of tourists and locals would fill the tables. The first shift started early in the morning. Vincenzo and Marì would go do the shopping at the Cambusa market, get change for the cash register at the post office, make the menus, start setting the tables. Sometimes they were given a short break in the early afternoon, but by five they had to start again and work till late. When there was too much to do – practically six days out of seven – they didn't even come home in the afternoon. Especially her father, who for the entire summer disappeared into the restaurant kitchen as if he had been swallowed up by a giant swordfish. He didn't get spit back out till September, at the beginning of the school year when he went back to being the most caring father on the island of Solea. He took her to school, went home to get the books she had forgotten, laughing it off and never telling her mom (it happened pretty often) and was always up for a game of cards or a bike ride along the sea before dinner. Though when Piscispada opened back up, fortunately for only five months of the year, he would vanish into thin air again. However, Rosa Lia didn't mind the idea of spending a little time alone. Now that her grandmother was gone and the day camp was out of the question, she was going to spend entire days laying under the large trees of Piazza Magnolia.

That first morning of vacation seemed no different than any of the other summer mornings, except for the heat, which had never been so high. Rosa Lia had cleaned the eyes of a two-week-old kitten with a cotton ball soaked in chamomile and then went back home to take off her flip-flops and put her sandals on. She tore off one last piece of brioche in the kitchen, grabbed the black purse she had crocheted a year earlier for the funeral and had never stopped carrying, closed the door and slipped the keys into her pocket, then immediately took them out again since she had forgotten her hat. When she finally had everything she needed, she went down the stairs of her building, jumping down the last two steps at every floor. In the stairwell, the air was still cool. She opened the front door to the building and, without looking back, started walking.

She almost never found time to stop by Piazza Magnolia in the park during the wintertime. She was at school till four, and after that, did her homework until almost dinnertime with her mother. Ever since they told her that her daughter might have ADD, Marì took all the teachers' advice to heart and made her do a lot more exercises than she was supposed to do. Sometimes Rosa Lia was so tired that the numbers and letters looked all muddled and she could hardly understand them. That ended up worrying her mother even more. But Rosa Lia always got the gist of what she was studying, albeit it in a more roundabout way. The fact that she had struggled so hard to understand it made it stick in her memory much longer.

At any rate, thank heavens, for the time being, she could put her summer homework off for a few weeks. Her mother was busy with work and, in those first days of vacation, Rosa Lia was

planning on doing nothing at all. With these good intentions in mind, after ten minutes, she saw the long fence surrounding the park. “Once this fence wasn’t as dark and rusty as you see it now. It was painted and shiny,” her grandmother had told her one afternoon with unquestionable certainty, as if she had been present at the inauguration.

The park Villa Margherita was home to the largest tree in Europe, that is what all the guide books said. At that very moment, a group of tourists was admiring it. The branches and exposed roots had formed a labyrinth of tunnels and passageways all around the tree, like a second tree but upside down. Rosa Lia had always thought that she could get lost inside it, if only she had the courage to venture inside. But every time she tried to approach the trunk, barely visible behind all that tangled mess, it was as if she were trampling on the feet or the back of a huge, many-headed beast, like the one sculpted into the marble of some of the fountains downtown. Something at once terrifying and fascinating, a giant creature which one day might awaken. A boy with hair down to his shoulders was having his picture taken in front of it, and she feared he might fall backward and vanish into the black heart of that impenetrable tangle.

She walked around to check things out, said hello to the turtles in the fountain in the middle of the garden. Then, when the caravan of tourists finally walked away, she was able to head over to the banyan tree. She lowered her head as a sign of respect, almost as if asking for its permission, and then she lay down on the bench in front of it. She covered her eyes, like when her grandma was with her. The wind rustled the exposed roots of the trees.

A few years back, some branches had fallen off in that very spot, and the news even ended up in the papers. “A forest caught fire somewhere and the poisonous stench of it drifted all the way here, stuck to it like a parasite and hurt our tree,” her grandma had told her, but in whisper. Rosa Lia had looked at the sky, obscured by clouds. It looked like it was covered by a white mold, as her grandma used to call it, and like an invisible fire had struck the banyan and broken off two of its arms.

Who knows why that memory had come back to her. She imagined that even her thoughts were tangled in the branches at the top of a large tree and that, every now and then, one would break off and fly away on its own. That day, for example, she thought to herself how she would have liked to go to the sea or for the sea to come to her, right there in Piazza Magnolia. She was sure she could hear it over the low roar of the cars and the harbor. The sound of the waves rose and fell in time with her breathing.

Suddenly, something fell onto her face. At first she wondered if it was one of her thoughts, which had become too heavy and waterlogged. She opened her eyes, but on the ground, there was only a leaf, rounded at the edges. She picked it up. It look like all the other leaves: one side, nonporous and shiny, the other side, soft and opaque. Then she rubbed it and noticed that it felt different. She could feel some different markings on the back. They couldn’t just be veins. She turned it over and, her heart racing, saw that her name was written on it, as if it had been sewn onto that leaf by the tree itself.

She looked around in disbelief. The only people were two street sellers standing in the shade on the other side of the fence and a tourist with glasses holding a map. No one had even noticed she was there. If someone had played a joke on her, they couldn’t be too far away.

She looked back at the leaf. The handwriting looked familiar. She jumped up and hopped over the roots of the tree to get closer to the trunk. She was still clutching the leaf in her left hand.

She rested her other hand on the surface of the wood. To her great surprise, she noticed that it was cool and smoother than she remembered. Being careful not to trip, she walked all the way around the tree. But there was nobody behind it. She looked up into its foliage. Looking back were nothing except hundreds of leaves reflecting the light of the sun.

She waited another minute.

No sign.

For a moment, she thought she had just imagined it all.

Then she opened the hand clutching the leaf and her name was still there.

"*Rosa* and *Lilium*, the rose and the lily: our name is made up of two flowers," her grandmother had explained. "We are roses without thorns, just like the patron saint of our city."

As Rosa Lia continued to reflect on the meaning of her name, she suddenly realized that she was hungry. She should have eaten all of that brioche her mother had left her.

Her mother!

She had promised she would go to the restaurant and pick up her lunch and had nearly forgotten! Better to set off immediately to beat the long line of customers invading the dining room just after noon.

She stuck the leaf in her purse and closed it carefully. She didn't want to lose it. She glanced back at the tree and her favorite bench one last time and hurried toward the gate of the park.